

FORUM

With the exception of editing for conformity to capitalization, punctuation, and citation style, letters to the forum are published verbatim.

Secrecy in Government

To the editor:

In response to Thomas Berry's letter to the editor in the Fall/Winter 2005 *American Archivist*, let me suggest that he read the article again, because he was apparently in a hurry the first time through or he is completely blinded by his own partisanship.

The point of the address and the subsequent article was that the government classifies too much information contained in public records and keeps it classified for too long. As a result, many people do not take the system seriously, and genuinely important classified information is placed at risk. There is virtually universal agreement on this point. It is not, as Mr. Berry tries to portray the situation, Democrat versus Republican or liberal versus conservative.

The article illustrates that overuse of classification is a longstanding concern that has pitted Congress against the executive branch of government. To convey the bipartisan nature of congressional concern, I used as examples quotes from such Republicans as Donald Rumsfeld and Trent Lott. Of the numerous examples cited, the 1956 Coolidge Committee was formed by Eisenhower-appointed secretary of defense Charles E. Wilson; the 1957 Wright Commission Report on Government Secrecy was a bipartisan congressional report; the Seitz Task Force was a 1970 Department of Defense initiative that took place during the Nixon Administration; the Stilwell Commission was formed at the behest of Republican secretary of defense Caspar Weinberger.

Regarding Mr. Berry's point about the atomic bomb off the coast of Savannah, Georgia, I would have preferred that the government find and remove the bomb rather than initially lying about its existence. It left in place a potentially catastrophic environmental disaster that may well occur when the bomb deteriorates and begins to leak radiation into the water off our coast. If

this is now a “war on terror” issue, it is only so because the federal government failed to deal with the situation in a timely way by cloaking itself in secrecy, thus putting its own citizens at risk.

The critical comments about the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion cited the Moynihan Commission, which used as one of its sources an internal CIA report highly critical of its own intelligence gathering prior to the landing. I am sure there were many in the 1961 CIA who, at the time, would have agreed with Berry in doubting a “poll of citizens of a totalitarian dictatorship.” But let’s remember that the poll was accurate. There was no popular uprising against Castro in response to the invasion.

I think that after a second reading he will agree that his accusation that I condemn “sinister motives” is wrong. The sentence to which he apparently refers simply says, “As barriers are erected to the release of information in records, people ask why and it is easy to find sinister motives” (p. 47). This sentence is part of a paragraph arguing that excessive secrecy can encourage people to conjure up sinister motives on the part of the government.

And what is the point about John Kerry’s war records? The election is over. George Bush won. That John Kerry “never has released his naval war records” is not relevant to the point of the article because the records are not classified. This is a privacy issue, not an issue of classification so it was beyond the primary scope of the article. Actually, some of the records have been made public (evaluation reports, fitness reports, and other documents from the Vietnam War era). You can find them on thesmokinggun.com Web site.

Since the article was written, the Information Security Oversight Office (ISOO) has reported that classification requests have increased another 10 percent. The ISOO also states that there are now more than one billion pages of classified material that are more than twenty-five years old. Notwithstanding this overwhelming evidence that the system of classification is out of control, Mr. Berry has tried to make it a political issue. He is free to do this, I suppose, but he might do a little more homework before airing his accusations publicly.

Timothy L. Ericson
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

“More Product, Less Process”

To the editor:

As a full-time processing archivist, I read with interest the article by Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner [“More Product, Less Process”: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *American Archivist*, Fall/Winter 2005]. It

certainly makes sense to dispose of large institutional record collections with box lists and MARC records. Unless it has been the victim of a catastrophe, a collection of institutional records can be fairly easily navigated by anyone who has at least a working knowledge of the organization. One would assume that this description fits most researchers above the college undergraduate level.

Where their prescription leads to mischief is in the area of collections of personal papers. These can not be adequately dealt with by mere box lists. The reason why will be self-evident to anyone who has spent any time processing such collections. Each one is as unique as its creator. A box list that says, "Box 15—Correspondence Files" may miss a very great deal. Letters buried by that accurate but nondescript label may hold reams of useful information concerning the subject's career or personal life. They may even hold the proverbial "smoking gun" so cherished by ambitious researchers. Who's to know it?

The processing of an archival collection is not the occasion for an Edvard Munch "Scream," rather it is a rare privilege. I would presume that the archivist has some native curiosity. It's a good trait for processing archivists to possess. The desire to know what's in the next file folder, the next box, is what gets the job done.

I would like to add that there is a degree of self-preservation involved in this as well. We archivists are information brokers and the name of the game in marketing information is the phrase "value-added." For the processing archivist, your finding aid is your value-added contribution. The ability to create a finding aid that sums up a potentially unwieldy sum of knowledge making it both useful and accessible is our special skill. It's what we bring to the table and we denigrate it at our own risk. Recall that there was a time when degreed librarians never thought that library technical assistants would replace them. It's not that difficult to learn how to generate a MARC record.

Andrew Mangravite
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

To the editor:

Mr. Mangravite's insistence that it is all well and good to take shortcuts with institutional records, but that our recommendations lead "to mischief . . . in the area of collections of personal papers," ignores much of the research in our *American Archivist* article. We did, in fact, address directly the applicability of our larger arguments to collections of personal papers (pp. 243-44) and went to great lengths to cite several decades worth of writings by manuscripts curators and records archivists in support of the argument that too much of what we persistently do during processing is overkill. Regrettably, his viewpoint is likely shared by a significant minority of our profession.

We can dismiss his rhetorical “The reason why will be self-evident to anyone who has spent any time processing such collections” based solely on the fact that it is *not* self-evident to the two of us, with 50-plus years of experience appraising and processing personal papers as well as institutional records. Nor is it self-evident to arguably the most-cited authors on personal papers and other manuscripts collections from earlier generations—Lucile Kane, Ruth Bordin, and Bob Warner—or current manuscripts curators cited throughout our article.

Their experience, like ours, reveals that most personal and family manuscript collections share important hallmarks of institutional archives: apparent provenance, internal structure, topical focus. This makes those collections amenable to rapid processing, and it would be a mistake to see all collections of personal papers as wildly idiosyncratic and hopelessly disorganized. Thus the three iterations of SAA’s manuals on arrangement and description have not devoted separate chapters to “manuscripts” and “archives,” much less to personal papers.

Moreover, in archival materials smoking guns are everywhere, not just in collections of personal papers. Institutional records have them as well, and a group of miscellaneous school records in a government archives may hold pupil information on a child who has not yet grown up to be president, which the series’ container list will not identify. Knowing this, do we devote a heroic effort to examining all the items in such records? Of course not, because, if we do, we’ll end up in the same old boat with a small fraction of our collections obsessively processed, and the great majority unprocessed, unavailable, and unknown. And that unprocessed majority will be littered with its own smoking guns.

Ultimately, however, Mr. Mangravite’s attempt to set personal papers above and beyond what he conceives as the more pedestrian realm of archives, construed narrowly, reflects a much larger set of issues than those related to processing, and cannot be confronted in the short format of a letters column. We believe it is long past time to emphasize the differences in the various types of collections archivists work with and high time to focus on the similarities. We also believe that it is long past time to believe that “The desire to know what’s in the next file folder, the next box, is what gets the [processor’s] job done.” What should get the job done is a desire to best connect researchers to the material in our holdings, to serve our constituents, however broadly or narrowly they may be defined, as best we can with the resources we have.

Mr. Mangravite cautions that “we denigrate [finding aids] at our own risk.” We have no recollection of ever having done so. And, ironically, we agree completely with Mr. Mangravite when he concludes: “We archivists are information brokers and the name of the game in marketing information is the phrase ‘value-added.’” However, that added value can come from catalog records, from finding aids, or even from other intellectual access aids—not solely, exclusively, and forever from providing long-winded descriptions.

S E C R E C Y I N G O V E R N M E N T

The letter writer seems to believe that we best add value by over-valuing personal papers as a category, by searching for smoking guns in every collection, and by asserting our “rare privilege” in processing every collection as though completely unique and with no accounting for the time or other resources we expend. But we believe that we add value most effectively and efficiently by managing our whole enterprise so that we make all of our collection materials available at some fundamental level to all researchers, and then providing additional resources to the small minority of collections whose value will be significantly enhanced by doing so.

Mark A. Greene, American Heritage Center
Dennis Meissner, Minnesota Historical Society